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ABSTRACT

The case study of the restructuring of an urban elementary school in Los Angeles (California), the Murchison Street School, in partnership with California State University is described. Of the school's 1,050 students, 67% were eligible for Chapter 1 funding at the start of the restructuring initiative. Over 3 years, parents, teachers, the community, and the university worked to create a school where children felt cared for and supported, and where social services were developed and coordinated so that students' needs were more fully met. The first step in the program was a 20/20 analysis to determine levels of reading achievement. Many students functioned below national norms in reading, and most students in the low 20% group were not enrolled in special education or intensive remediation. Students of limited English proficiency were among those most in need of remediation. School staff worked with university faculty to develop an action plan to enrich the literacy atmosphere, increase parent awareness and participation, and develop an integrated services center at the school site. Results from the literacy initiative, the parent center, and the integrated social services were evaluated. Student attendance has improved and parent participation has increased greatly. Teachers have begun to work in teams, and have developed new enthusiasm for improving achievement. (Contains four references.) (SLD)

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Spotlight on Student Success

A digest of research from the Mid-Atlantic Laboratory for Student Success No. 114

School-University Partnership:
Restructuring an Urban School

by
Andrea G. Zetlin

OVERVIEW

This *Spotlight on Student Success* presents an overview of a case study of the restructuring of an urban elementary school in Los Angeles, the Murchison Street School, in partnership with neighboring California State University. At the project's inception, Murchison Street, which draws its students from a housing project in east Los Angeles, was one of the lowest achieving schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Of its 1,050 students, 67% were eligible for Chapter 1 funding and 71% were classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP).

Over the course of three years, parents, teachers, community representatives, and university faculty worked together to create a radically different kind of school; a school where children felt cared for and supported, and where social services were developed and coordinated so that students' social, physical, and emotional needs were more fully met.

20/20 ANALYSIS: THE FIRST STEP IN THE PROCESS

Despite ongoing attempts to reform the school's educational program and improve students' learning, the Murchison Street School staff had eventually recognized that these piecemeal efforts were not sufficient to change the direction of the lives of their students. The school's principal contacted faculty from California State University and asked them to serve as a catalyst for engaging teachers in a more comprehensive school restructuring effort. The first step in the process was to perform a 20/20 Analysis[1] of reading achievement scores to identify school needs and resources. Reading scores were selected for analysis because poor reading ability was the most frequent cause for referral to special education and Chapter 1 programs.

The 20/20 Analysis revealed the following patterns: (a) large numbers of students were functioning well below national norms in reading; (b) most of the students in the low 20% group were not enrolled in special education or other intensive remediation programs; (c) the primary-level grades were the most in need of literacy enrichment; (d) English-instructed students were most in need of remediation; (e) many LEP students in general, and special education students in particular, were not receiving adequate primary language support; and (f) school attendance was a pervasive problem, especially for the youngest students, emphasizing the need for greater contact with parents.

Next, school staff collaborated with university faculty with expertise in special education, curriculum and instruction, family studies, and counseling to devise and implement a plan of action for school reform. The plan had three major objectives: (a) to modify curriculum and instructional practices so that classrooms featured an enriched literacy environment; (b) to increase the level of parent awareness of and opportunity for involvement in their children's schooling; and (c) to develop an integrated services center at the school site featuring the coordination of services for children and families.

MODELS OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL REFORM

Based on these collaboration plans, a major effort was launched to improve instruction in language and reading in primary grades (K-2) and in grades 3 through 6. Special education students and staff were integrated into general education classrooms on a full-time or part-time basis. A station teaching approach was adopted, whereby teachers divided the instructional content and each took responsibility for part of it. Each team of teachers selected an instructional grouping model that best suited their particular class composition and with which they felt most comfortable, for example, grouping by English language proficiency.

Spotlight on Student Success is an occasional series of articles highlighting findings from The Mid-Atlantic Laboratory for Student Success (LSS) that have significant implications for improving the academic success of students in the mid-Atlantic region. For more information on LSS and on other LSS publications, contact The Mid-Atlantic Laboratory for Student Success, 9th Floor, Ritter Hall Annex, 13th Street and Cecil B. Moore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA, 19122; telephone: (800) 892-5550; e-mail: lss@vm.temple.edu. Also visit our World Wide Web site at http://www.temple.edu/departments/LSS.

Strategies to Increase Out-of-School Reading

In order to increase the amount of time students spent reading at home, a series of recreational reading festivals were held to motivate students to increase their out-of-school reading.

In the first festival, upper elementary students were targeted so that they would become role models for the primary students. The second festival focused on primary students and the third included the entire school. Students kept track of the number of minutes they read each night by having an adult family member sign their record sheets. Every few days the total reading time was computed for all participants and posted on large signs throughout the school. The results were celebrated in school assemblies and after-school parties.

Opportunities for Parents

A parent center was established as a bridge between parents and the school and to facilitate empowerment within the larger community. A parent was chosen to act as coordinator, and to work with school and university faculty in organizing center-sponsored activities. Activities included a "welcoming place" for parents to meet informally with other parents and school staff to discuss concerns such as school and personal problems, as well as community issues. Parents were given the opportunity to become actively involved in school business, assist in the development of instructional materials for classroom use, and to sponsor grade-level and school-wide events. As other needs became known, the center also arranged for English language classes, a mentor parent leadership training program, and a weekly family history group.

Integrated Services

Because the Murchison staff strongly believed that physical and mental health services were as important as quality instruction to improving student achievement, the school reached out to the Los Angeles County departments of health, mental health, and social services to better coordinate services and make them more accessible to students and their families. After intensive collaborative planning efforts, a school-based integrated services center opened, offering a variety of health and social services to students and families.

On-site services such as short-term counseling, immunizations, and screenings are available at the center. Resource and referral services including dental and eye care, substance abuse programs, short-term housing, and emergency food supplies are also available through case management. Once a referral is made by a teacher, school social worker, or a nurse, a case manager is assigned and a family plan is developed. By collaborating with other agencies, the center is better able to meet the comprehensive needs of the students and their families.

RESULTS

The most recent data demonstrate impressive gains in student attendance. Over the past three years, students have gone from an average of 1.4 absences per month to .95 absences per month. Gains are also evident in the number of students with perfect attendance, up from 60 three years ago to over 250 last year.

Parent involvement in all levels of school business is another area of significant improvement. Before active outreach efforts were focused on parents, few participated in school events, except to attend parent-teacher conferences or open houses. Parents now actively take part on school leadership and parent advisory councils, attend meetings and parent programs, and volunteer in classrooms and in the schoolyard during recess and lunch periods. They attend schoolwide events in such substantial numbers that special assemblies have to be repeated.

Another improvement realized by the collaboration is that participating teachers within the upper and lower grades have begun to work as teams. They are no longer isolated from each other and collectively assume responsibility for students' learning and academic restructuring. Observational and self-report teacher data indicate that they are using more constructivistic practices and providing students with greater opportunities for developing literacy. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the structural and organizational changes that have occurred in their classrooms have enabled these teachers to establish the professional norms of a learning community. Their enthusiasm as they see growth in students' reading and writing skills has influenced other teachers at the school who are interested in joining the teams and making changes in their own classrooms.

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NOTE

[1]For a more complete description of the uses and methods of 20/20 Analysis, see *Spotlight* #101, also available from the Laboratory for Student Success.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

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